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Hold'em Brain: Shorthanded Limit Hold'em

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Introduction to Shorthanded Limit Hold'em

Shorthanded Hold'em games are hard to find in brick and mortar poker rooms. In the middle and lower limits, it is played at times, but never with any regularity. Sometimes players are willing to start a game shorthanded in the hopes that it fills up, but if it stays shorthanded, they quickly move to another limit or leave. The exact opposite would happen late at night or early in the morning. During these times, players would leave to go home, thus leaving the game shorthanded. The players who still wanted to play would have no choice but to play shorthanded or go home. These games are often good games because the players still playing are usually the ones that are stuck and are not playing their best game.

The internet has changed the world in many different ways. In the poker universe, the internet has brought online poker to many players, and it has brought more interest to shorthanded games. Many online casinos have tables set up specifically for shorthanded games. They may have a 6-player maximum table, a 5-player maximum table or heads-up tables.

Shorthanded Hold'em may be right for you if any of these describe you:

- you can tolerate the wilder fluctuations in the shorthanded games
- you are willing to play more aggressively
- you get bored waiting for hands in full games
- you like action and would like to get involved in more pots without giving up edge
- you do not mind getting heads-up in many situations after the Flop
- your strength is in reading hands and playing the players

If any of these descriptions pertain to you, then shorthanded games may be right for you. These are games that loose-aggressive players prefer. In fact, the loose-aggressive players can often perform better in the shorthanded game by just playing the same way that they do in full games. The shorthanded games suit their style better than full games do. The loose-aggressive players' natural play now becomes closer to the winning formula in shorthanded games. This is not necessarily because those players understand the differences between shorthanded and full games.

They are playing the game the same way that they know how, and it just so happens that their strategy is closer to the correct strategy when there are fewer players than when there are more. Meanwhile, the tight-passive players will have trouble in the shorthanded games if they do not change their strategy from a full game. Playing tight and waiting for high quality hands means giving up a lot of edge to the aggressive players in the shorthanded games.

The Spectrum of tables with different number of players

Shorthanded Limit Hold'em is a very different game than a full 10-handed or 9-handed game. It

looks like the same game, the rules are the same, but there are many differences. Even within the realm of shorthanded games, there are distinctions between those that are semi-shorthanded (like a 6-handed game) versus those that are extremely shorthanded (like a 3-handed game).

Here are comments on games with different number of players and how they may be different.

10-8 players: Full Game. Most poker literature assumes the game is played with a full complement of players. Some casinos have ten seats at the table, making a table of ten players a full table, while other casinos only have nine seats.

7 players: There are two distinct types of 7-handed games. A 7-handed game can play very much like a full game. This can happen when a couple of players have just left the table and the new players have not arrived at their seat yet, or when a couple of the players are taking a break from the game. If this is the case, then for the most part, it will play very much like a full game. Most players will not adjust their mentality toward the game. The other type of 7-handed game is one that looks like it is a permanent 7-handed game. The game has been played 7-handed for a while, and there is no real expectation that the game will fill up anytime soon. In that case, the game will usually be just a bit more aggressive, as the mentalities of the players are focused on 7 players in the game rather than 9 or 10. In this case, the players are now used to the fact that the game is a 7-handed game and will not revert back into a full game anytime soon. However, in general, most 7-handed games will still resemble a full game. Each hand can be viewed like a full 9-handed game where the first two players have already folded, thus leaving 7 players in the game.

6 players: Some online poker sites have tables with only 6 seats. This game has a few interesting aspects in that the under the gun player should play close to the same strategy as in a full game, but the later position players can play much more aggressively. The reason the under the gun player needs to play fairly tight is due to the increased aggressiveness of the late position players. This means the early position players will get raised more often and it is more difficult to create a multiple player pot since there are fewer players. With 6 players and fewer, it is usually incorrect to limp into the pot with a call if no one else is in the pot yet. Any hand that is playable should be a hand that is raisable when no other player has entered the pot. This is not true when there are more players at the table because there is a chance that other players may limp in after you, thus making the pot size bigger. In 9-handed games, when you limp into the pot in an early position with a hand such as JTs or 77, you may be able to expect a pot large enough to make it a profitable play. Once it gets down to 6 players, this possibility becomes too slim to consider limping in. You will not be happy if you get raised and have to play the pot heads-up and in poor position when you hold a drawing hand like JTs.

5 players: In a 5-handed game, many players will be ultra aggressive. The under the gun position still needs to be somewhat selective, but a hand like A8s is now strong enough to raise all the time in that position. Some players will take it too far and raise under the gun with a hand like K9o. Those players will get punished since they will often get re-raised by players in a later position who may hold hands such as AJo and KQs.

The cutoff and the button can be even more liberal. The button can arguably open-raise more often (when he actually has the chance to) in 5-handed games compared to 3-handed games. In

3-handed games, it is almost guaranteed that at least one of the blinds will see the Flop. In 5-handed games, there is a slightly higher chance that the blinds will fold to a button open-raise. Even if they call the pre-Flop raise, they will fold more liberally on the Flop than if it was 3-handed games.

4 players: The under the gun player is the same as the cutoff player in 4-handed games. This player should align himself with cutoff strategy more so than under the gun strategy. It is probably fair to say that this player should not even think of himself as the player that is first to act anymore, but rather, this player should focus on the fact that he is the second to last to act. In 5-handed games, the button needs to be somewhat selective in re-raising the under the gun's pre-Flop raise. However, in 4-handed games, the button can widen his range of re-raising hands a bit because the button knows that the under the gun player will open-raise with more hands when it is only 4-handed compared to 5-handed.

The small blind still needs to be aggressive and three bet when he actually holds a legitimate hand, but fold most of the time due to the expected ultra aggressiveness of all the other players in the later rounds. Since the small blind will always be in a horrible position on all streets, it is important to force the big blind to fold since that player also has a nice positional advantage over the small blind.

The big blind should be calling one raise with a wide variety of hands, but be very selective when there are two bets to him. With two bets, it means at least one of the raisers probably has a legitimate hand. So the big blind must also have a legitimate hand in order to continue with the hand.

3 players: There is only one non-blind hand in this game. The button must be very aggressive because any chance that any of the blinds fold is a nice bonus. But the button must keep in mind that if the blinds are constantly calling him, he must throw away some hands as well. The key to raising on the button is how likely the blinds are going to call pre-Flop raises and how they play post-Flop. If the big blind folds most of his hands, then this is a fantastic game for the player on the button. Typically, in 3-handed games, the blinds will call more often when the button raises than when the button open-raises in 5-handed games. In 3-handed games, the blinds will be constantly pounded with pre-Flop raises (and raising pre-Flop themselves when they are on the button) that calling a raise in the blinds becomes almost automatic with any hand. This aggressive play can especially happen online. Online games are also much faster as there is no need to wait for a human dealer to shuffle the cards. If the online players are playing quickly and using the automatic buttons, the game may seem more like a video game than poker.

In 3-handed games, the small blind must be very aggressive when he has a good hand and re-raise with them. The range of hands that the small blind can three bet with should increase compared to that in 4-handed games when the cutoff player raises, but it should stay the same as when the button in a 4-handed game is the open-raiser. As in most cases, calling a lone raiser when you are in the small blind position is a poor strategy because it gives the big blind, another player with position over you, a cheap way to play the pot.

If the button is open-raising with many hands, as should be expected, then the big blind should be

calling with many hands. The big blind should also often re-raise pre-Flop depending on how the button plays on the Turn. The reason the big blind should think all the way out to the Turn is due to the differences in how opponents will act on the Turn when they do not have anything.

Against opponents that will keep betting until someone raises, it is better to just call the pre-Flop raise and wait until the Turn to put in a check-raise with a good hand. You want the players who are ultra-aggressive to hang themselves with their own aggressiveness, so do not stop them from playing aggressively too early in the hand. If you suspect these players will slow down and play more reasonably if you re-raise pre-Flop or check-raise on the Flop, then you should not reveal the strength of your hand until the Turn and let them do the betting for you instead.

Against opponents that may slow down on the Turn when they do not have much, it is best to do the raising pre-Flop. You would not be able to count on these players to bet when you check to them on the Turn. Against opponents like these, you would prefer to get their money in early since they are less likely to give it to you later. Clearly, understanding how your opponents play is important. With fewer players, it becomes even more important.

An interesting aspect in 3-handed games is the difference in seat selection strategy compared to games with more players. Typically you would want the aggressive and better players to sit on your right and act before you have to act. This way you can see their actions before it is necessary for you to act. However, the players that play well in shorthanded games will often play the small blind correctly, that is, they will usually re-raise or fold in that position. Compare that to a bad player that will often call a raise while in the small blind. His call in the small blind would give the big blind 5:1 odds to see the Flop (there are 5 small bets in the pot - 2 small bets from the button, 1 small bet from the small blind and 1 small bet posted by the big blind). The bad player in the 3-handed game may also make the mistake of limping while on the button. This allows the small blind 5:1 odds to see the Flop (there are 2.5 small bets in the pot and the small blind only needs to put in a half of a small bet). So if the bad player sits to your right, you can benefit most from his mistakes when he is on the button and in the small blind. If the bad player sits to your left, the player that will benefit most by the bad player's mistakes is not you, but the third player.

Assume you are in 3-handed game with one good player and one bad player. The first chart is when the bad player is sitting to your right. The second chart is when the bad player is sitting to your left.

Bad Player on your right

Your position	Bad Player's position (on your right)	Mistakes by Bad Player	Who benefits most by the mistakes by the bad player
Small Blind	Button	Limps in too often on the Button. This is great news for the Small Blind as he gets 5:1 odds to see the Flop.	Small Blind (You)

Big Blind	Small Blind	Calls raises from the Button. This is great news for the Big Blind as he gets 5:1 odds to see the Flop.	Big Blind (You)
Button	Big Blind	Calls raises from the Button. This is not good or bad news because many players will call anyway.	Nobody

Bad Player on your Left

Your position	Bad Player's position (on your left)	Mistakes by Bad Player	Who benefits most by the mistakes by the bad player
Small Blind	Big Blind	Calls raises from the Button. This is not good or bad news because many players will call anyway.	Nobody
Big Blind	Button	Limps in too often on the Button. This is great news for the Small Blind as he gets 5:1 odds to see the Flop.	Small Blind (not you)
Button	Small Blind	Calls raises from the Button. This is great news for the Big Blind as he gets 5:1 odds to see the Flop.	Big Blind (not you)

Since you are in the blinds/button dynamic in every single hand in 3-handed games, the advantage of having the bad player on your right becomes very useful in the pre-Flop round.

These issues are why it is better to have the better player to your left and the worse player to your right in 3-handed games. Most of the good players have it ingrained in their head that they want other good players to sit to their right. While this is true in most cases, they may not understand the change that occurs when the game is exactly 3-handed. Thus the good player will often comply with your wishes by deliberately choosing a seat to your left (if they consider you a good player).

Typically one would also care about having position post-Flop against good players. Players want to act after the good players have already acted rather than before. However, when in 3-handed games, many players will call with hands that they would not in a full game, and the hands play a little bit more on “cruise control”, since it is difficult to get anyone who has a piece of the board to fold. This means that having position post-Flop is a bit less meaningful in 3-handed games compared to games with more players. I believe the edge gained pre-Flop by having the good player to your immediate left in a three-handed game is greater than the edge lost by having

that same good player to your left during post-Flop rounds.

One time when I was playing 3-handed at an online site, this exact same dynamic presented itself. I was playing in a heads-up game against a poor player. Soon after, a very good player joined us and he sat to my immediate right. Right before my big blind came up, I left the table, but I came back in to sit to his right. The player played a few hands and I thought I was home free. But lo and behold right before his big blind came up the next time around, he left and rejoined the table in exactly one to the left of the poor player, thus leaving me no space to squeeze in between them.

2 players (heads-up): It is important to know where the small blind is located in a heads-up game. There are some online sites that will place the small blind on the button, with the small blind first to act before the Flop, and last to act after the Flop. Other sites will place the big blind on the button with the small blind in the other position. In that case, the small blind is the first to act in all rounds. There is a big difference between these two blind/button positioning. If you are in the small blind and do not have the button, then that means you must act first on every round. This gives you more of a disadvantage than if you are in the small blind with the button, because you only have to act first pre-Flop, after that you have positional advantage in three other rounds. This means that in a game with the small blind on the button, you can play many more hands than if the small blind was not on the button. In brick and mortar rooms, the positioning of the blinds is often determined by the players since the dealers do not usually know the rules as they do not deal heads-up games often.

Playing the Players in a Shorthanded Game

Understanding your opponents and how they play and think are crucial parts of the game in a full game. It is even more important in a shorthanded game. In a full table, it is important to understand how your opponents play certain types of hand. Unfortunately since there are so many players and you cannot play too many hands without being reckless to your own bankroll, you will not be able to take advantage of their weaknesses as often as you would like to without getting run over by other players when they have legitimate hands. One of the fundamentals of Limit Hold'em is to be selective with the hands that you decide to play from the very beginning. Since selectiveness is crucial, you will not be playing all that many hands over the course of an hour, and that means you will not get many opportunity to take advantage of the weaker players.

Let's compare that to the situation in a shorthanded game. In a shorthanded game, you will get many opportunities to butt heads against each and every one of the other players because you will be playing a higher percentage of your hands and typically more hands are played per hour. The hands play a lot faster because the dealer has to wait for fewer players to make decisions, and that means more hands are dealt per hour. Since there are fewer players in each hand, that means the relative strength of some hands increases tremendously. Combining these two factors, we can see that each player will be involved in many more pots and play more hands in a shorthanded game than in a full game. Not only do you play a higher percentage of hands, but you also see more hands dealt to you per hour. This means that if you have an advantage over some of the players, instead of being able to apply that advantage once or twice in an hour, you can now apply that same advantage five or six times in an hour. That should show a tremendous increase in your expected profits if you know how to take advantage of this difference. That is the reason why shorthanded play can be so profitable for an expert player. He can expose the weaknesses of his

opponents more often per hand and with more hands per hour. BINGO!

Knowing the Pot Odds is less useful in Shorthanded Games

Knowing if you have correct odds to continue with a hand is crucial in a full game. It is important as well in shorthanded games but it is not as important. Usually you will have more outs than you expect in a shorthanded game without knowing exactly what your outs are. If you have an open-ended straight draw in a shorthanded game, you are more likely to have additional outs than in a full game. Pairing one of your hole cards has a higher chance of being an out in a shorthanded game than in a full game. Also, since players will bluff and semi-bluff more in shorthanded games, there is a chance you are actually ahead and have more outs than non-outs.

Free cards in Shorthanded Games

It is less dangerous to give a free card in shorthanded games because it is likely that the pot is smaller than in a full game, or your opponent has fewer chances of drawing out (i.e. your opponent may only have one overcard in a shorthanded game, but your opponent may have two in a full game). Also showing weakness in shorthanded games is more likely to induce your opponent to make a bluff bet that he may not otherwise make since there is more of an aggressive culture in shorthanded games.

Example :

You raised pre-Flop and the big blind calls.

Your hand: KQo

Flop: K-8-3 rainbow

You bet and your opponent calls. It is useful to note that your bet is mandatory on the Flop because the bet on the Flop does not give any information to the other player. You had raised pre-Flop, so he is expecting you to bet on the Flop no matter what you have. It is the same situation as explained in the Monte Hall section of the Extra Topics chapter of this book. You would have also bet with a hand like QT, hoping that he folds on the Flop. It is the Turn that makes this hand interesting in a shorthanded game. If an Ace comes on the Turn, and your opponent checks to you, you must decide if you want to bet or check. The Ace is a scare card, it will scare both you and your opponent. If you bet on the Turn, and your opponent does not have an Ace or King, it makes it very difficult for him to call. Even with a split pair of 8's, he may not call. The reason is that you are likely to have an A, a K or a pocket pair between K's and 8's. You do not want him to fold if he doesn't have a pair, since you are only giving him a free card when he is on a gutshot straight draw.

A check in this case may be the best play. If he has an Ace, he will bet out on the river, and you will call and lose, but this is better than possibly getting check-raised on the turn. If he only has a split pair of 8's, he may very well bet on the River thinking you are going to call with a Q-high, or hoping you will incorrectly fold a pair of K's. If he checks and you bet, then he is more likely to call on the River than if you had bet both on the Turn and River. You want to check on the Turn against the better players and bet on the Turn against the calling stations. Against players who can fold a pair of 8's on the Turn when you bet, you should check. Against players who will call with just a pair 8's, you would want to keep betting.

Bigger wins and bigger losses in Shorthanded games

In shorthanded play, all players play more hands than in a full game. They will be raising pre-Flop, defending blinds much more often. They may be betting and raising with middle pair and semi-bluffing with straight and flush draws more often. Not only is it correct to raise more and be more aggressive, it is also correct to call down hands more often due to other players' increased aggression. What this means is that the good days will bring higher profits while the bad days will bring worse losses. Be prepared for this in shorthanded play. It may be correct to play a notch or two lower compared to the typical limits you play in a full game, in order to keep the wins and losses roughly the same amount. This may help with your sanity and keep you in the game.

Shorthanded games vs Full games: When it is folded to the Cutoff

Many people compare shorthanded play to the times in full games when it is folded to the late position players. I do not agree with this, I think these two situations are very different although they may look very similar. The difference is due to the mood of the table. In shorthanded games, players are playing more aggressively. They are constantly raising, re-raising, bluffing, semi-bluffing, and consequently calling down with hands that may look unwarranted. This atmosphere makes shorthanded games different than full games. If this atmosphere did not exist, it means a raise or a semi-bluff will appear stronger than it does when this atmosphere does exist.

This means that in full games, when it is folded to the cutoff, a raise will be given slightly more respect by most players than in a raise in the same position in shorthanded games. In the higher limit full games, the comparison may be more valid because many players in those games play aggressively and know these type of tricky plays.

Drawing Hands

Drawing hands, such as suited connectors are still playable in shorthanded games, but they are worth less since these hands play best in pots with many players. In shorthanded games, you can raise with these hands on the button or call one raise when in the big blind, but they cannot stand to cold call a raise from another player or to call raises in the small blind. One of the reasons this type of hand can still be playable when it is shorthanded is through the use of the semi bluff bet or raise.

Example:

You are in a 4-handed game and open-raise on the button with 9♥8♥. The small blind folds and the big blind calls.

Your hand: 9♥8♥

Flop: A♥6♠5♦

You have an inside straight draw and a runner-runner flush draw. Also you can use the scare card on the board, the Ace, to your advantage. Most players will check to you and you should bet. The Ace on the board will scare off most players from calling without a pair or a draw, and they will fold hands such as K3 and J8. On the other hand, if they call, you still have a few possible outs. You can hit the 7 for your inside straight draw, you can hit a 9 or an 8 for a pair and that would beat any other split pair other than a split pair of A's. How you continue with the hand on the Turn depends on how your opponent plays. If he is a decent player, one that you do not think would

throw in a call on the Flop with no pair, no draw, and no overcards to the board, then you need to watch out as you could very well be beat (he may be letting you bet his hand for him). If you are against calling stations who are loose and passive enough to throw in a call with QJ, then you need to bet again when checked to on the Turn and hope he folds at that time (assuming you have not hit your straight). The fact is that he will miss the Flop often, and even if you are behind, as long as you have some outs that may save you, you are happy with it. He may fold now, or he may fold on the Turn, or you may hit your draw on a later round if he does not fold. The problem arises when he re-raises you and tells you he actually has a pair. In that case, you need to see if your hand has any chance of winning. Some players will raise religiously with middle pair when it is shorthanded, so with 98, you may have two overcards plus a gutshot straight draw for a possible total of 10 outs. A hand like that is worthwhile to continue with, even against a check-raise.

The main strength with a drawing hand in a steal position is that it can make many possibilities to continue with the hand. That means you can appear to be strong and semi-bluff bet or raise. When you combine it with the same type of play when you have a stronger hand, such as AK or a big pair, then your opponents will be off kilter as to what to do against you when you are raising. If they regularly call you on the Flop with a hand like QT when the board is A-9-3, then that is OK too since you will be able to pound them and extract more from them when you do have an Ace.

Having an Ace is more useful in Shorthanded games than Full games

Having an A is more useful in shorthanded games because there will be plenty of hands where no player has a pair. Also, because players are playing more hands, it is less likely to run into a player with two pair (like A's and 6's) when you only have a split pair of A's.

Let's take a look at a Flop like 8-6-3 when you have AK. In full games, some players may be willing to play hands such as A8, A6, and A3. In shorthanded games, the same players are willing to add these hands: K8, Q8, 98, 76,87, T8, and 65. They are less likely to hold an A in shorthanded games, so you will not have to be as worried about the A making someone else two pair (when you make a pair) as you would in a full game. Also, AK has an increased value as a showdown hand.

In shorthanded games, players may be willing to call down to the River with any A, but no pair. In such a case, AK is a strong hand since it is the nut no-pair.

Calling a bet instead of raising

Sometimes it is useful to just call your opponent instead of raising. This is a situation where you are not sure your opponent has a worse hand than you or has a better hand than you. If his hand is worse than yours, but you do not show strength by raising him, he may keep betting in the hopes of getting you to fold. However if you do raise when his hand is worse than yours, his hand may be bad enough that he would fold and you lose the possibility of winning additional bets in later rounds.

This passive strategy has a little bit of risk to it because if he has a worse hand, he may be able to catch up and hit a 3 or 4 outer. In order for this strategy to work, you have to be playing against a player that is aggressive enough to keep betting when you do not show strength. If you are playing against a calling station or an otherwise weak player, you would not expect him to keep betting on future rounds with bad hands. If you do raise against an aggressive player, you put yourself in the position of a semi-bluff re-raise that you may not be able to call if you raised him with a marginally good hand. On the other hand, if his hand is better than yours, you do not want to raise because he is going to call or raise you back.

Example 1:

You are in a 5-handed game, on the button with A7o and you open-raise. The small blind folds and an aggressive player in the big blind calls.

Your hand: A7o

Flop: A-9-8 rainbow

The aggressive player in the big blind checks and you bet. Then the aggressive player check-raises.

Your decision is whether to re-raise or call. If you re-raise, you are giving him the message that you have a pair of A's (if not better). The aggressive player can check-raise with many hands, including a pair of A's, a straight draw, a pair of 9's or 8's. He knows that if you do not have an A and raised with two non-Ace high cards, such as KQ, KJ, it will be a tough decision for you to call both a Flop check raise and a Turn bet.

You would prefer that your opponent have an A with a lower kicker. Then you could re-raise on the Flop or raise on the Turn and win more than if you just called him down.

If he has a better hand than yours, such as AK, AQ, AJ, AT or two pair then you will lose more money by being aggressive. If he is on a straight draw and catches it, then your raise will lose you more money in the hand. Basically, if you show aggression after you get check-raised, you may be putting yourself in a situation where you will lose more bets when if he is already ahead or he catches his draw. Not only will you lose more bets when you are the loser, you will also win fewer bets when you are the winner. Compare the following situations:

Situation A: Your opponent is on a straight draw, you call his check-raise on the Flop and you raise him on the Turn.

If he catches the straight, he will bet out on the River. If he does not, he will check on the River, and then fold to your bet. You have shown him that you have a made hand on the River, so he will no longer think about bluffing on the River. So if you raise on the Turn, and he catches on the River, then you will lose 3 bets (2 bets on the Turn and 1 bet on the River). Meanwhile, if he does not catch on the River, then you will win 2 bets (2 on the Turn and none on the River).

Situation B: Your opponent is on a straight draw, you call his check-raise on the Flop and you call him on the Turn.

If he catches the straight, he will bet out on the River. If he does not, he will also bet out on the River because he will think he has a chance of winning the pot with another bet since you have not shown him anymore aggression. So if you just call on the Turn, you lose 2 bets (1 on the Turn and 1 on the River) if he catches his straight. Meanwhile, if he does not catch a straight, then you will win 2 bets (1 on the Turn and 1 on the River).

In Situation A, you lose 3 bets when you lose and win 2 bets when you win. In Situation B, you lose 2 bets when you lose and win 2 bets when you win. This occurs because your opponent is very aggressive and you can count on him to bluff on the River if he does not catch his hand.

Shorthanded side games versus Shorthanded Tournament situations

This is a book written for Limit Hold'em side games not tournaments. Shorthanded side games and shorthanded situations in tournaments are not the same. The all-in situations and prize structure in tournaments add a unique dimension to the game. In tournaments, players have much fewer chips to battle with than they would have in ring games. There may be a huge disparity in 5th place prize money compared to 4th place prize money. This payout structure changes the EV and therefore the analysis and calculations. So don't think of this section when you are in the shorthanded situation in a tournament. Shorthanded ring games and shorthanded tournaments are two different worlds.

Be careful when the table becomes full again

In a shorthanded game, you will be playing more aggressively and playing more hands than at a full game. You will be calling down more hands, bluffing and semi-bluffing more yourself as well. This is a good mentality to have in a shorthanded game, but not necessarily in a full game. Often a game will start shorthanded, but as more players sit down, it slowly turns into a full game. These are the times when some players find it tough to adjust quickly. They are still in the mindset of raising aggressively and calling down bluffs. If they keep up that mentality in a full game, it is clear that they will be in big trouble.

It is necessary to always keep in mind how many players are being dealt in the hand. Raising with KJo under the gun is fine in a 4-handed game, but it is not a good strategy in a 7-handed game. You need to change gears quickly when the table fills up and becomes a full game. The opposite is true too when people start leaving and it goes from a full game to a shorthanded game. You need to adjust and adapt to the changing environment.

A Cold Caller is not as dangerous in a shorthanded game

Here are two situations that may look similar but are very different.

Situation A

It is a 9-handed game and a player in middle position has raised. Immediately after him, a decent, player (who plays a few too many hands) cold calls. You are in the small blind with KJo. In this case, not only do you have to be concerned about the raiser, but you also have to be concerned about the cold caller. You have to be worried that one of those hands has your hand out-kicked, with a hand such as AK, AJ, AT, KQ. Those are all reasonable hands that normal players may raise and cold call with. Although you may expect a cold caller to re-raise with AK, it should not be a surprise to see the player call with hands like AJ, AT, KQ, and KJs. If the cold caller held any of these hands, it would reduce your chance to win. Folding with KJo in the small blind would be prudent in a situation where it is likely you are being dominated by at least one of the hands you are up against.

Situation B

It is a 5-handed game and the under the gun player has raised. The cutoff player is the same player as the cold caller that was written about in Situation A. He cold calls in this situation as well. You are in the small blind with a hand like KJo.

The nature of a 5-handed game is usually much more aggressive and loose than a 9-handed game. You will often see a re-raise rather than a cold call in this shorthanded game. Most players would definitely re-raise with a high quality hand such as AK, AJ, KQ, KJs in the shorthanded game

whereas they would just call in a full game. Since the cold caller did not raise and only called, it now makes it less likely he holds one of these hands compared to the same situation in a 9-handed game. In the 9-handed game, it was much more likely that he held one of these stronger hands if he cold called because of the fact that a full game is a more passive game. Raising with those hands are more dangerous because a middle position raiser in a 9 player game probably has a better hand than an under the gun raiser in a 5-handed game. So in a 5-handed game, you can read this player's cold call as telling you that his hand is not as worrisome as it would be in a full game. Also, the under the gun player in a 5-handed game can raise with a much wider variety of hands, so a call with KJo in the small blind when there is a raiser and a caller, is a better play in a shorthanded game than in a full game.

Turn or River card pairs the Top card on the Board

Shorthanded players are more likely to play aggressively when they have a piece of the Flop than they would in full games. They will often raise on the Flop with hands that are worse than top pair. These hands include middle pair, bottom pair, overcards, flush draws and straight draws. If they are super-aggressive, they will continue betting with those hands through the River. If you have middle pair, you will have to call down your opponents more often in shorthanded games. Since you are likely to be ahead when you have middle pair, when the Turn or the River pairs the top card, generally you should be happy. If you were ahead, you are still ahead.

Here is an example.

Your hand: AT

Flop: Q-T-3 rainbow

Let's say you bet and your late position opponent raises. You know your opponent is aggressive in shorthanded games, thus you are quite sure he is just as likely to raise with a split pair of Q's as a split pair of T's. You are also quite sure he would be raising with bottom pair as well as a straight draw. Here is a chart of the type of hands he could have and the corresponding outs.

Type of Hand	Estimated Outs for your opponent
Top Pair with a Q	40
Middle Pair with a T	3
Bottom Pair with a 3	5
Open-ended Straight Draw with KJ, J9	13 or 11
Inside Straight Draw with AJ, K9, J8	7

If he has a Q, you are drawing only to 5 outs or less (there are only 2 T's and 3 A's unaccounted for). If he has any of the other hands, then you are the favorite. If you think he would raise with

all of these hands, then on average, you will be the favorite with your AT.

Turn: Q

When the Q comes on the Turn and pairs the board, you can be more confident that your hand is the better hand if you thought you were the favorite on the Flop. If your opponent had a worse hand than you, then the Q does not improve his hand. If your opponent had a better hand, then you may be drawing dead (except when your opponent has T3 as the second Q counterfeits his two pair). Look at the chart above and you will see that against every type of hand on that chart, the relative strength of your hand has stayed the same.

If you estimated you were the favorite on the Flop, then when the Q comes on the Turn, you are still the favorite. No hand that was behind you on the Flop could have improved past your hand. In fact your hand is even better now because your opponent would only have one more card to see if he can improve. You are happy to see the Turn pair the board.

Making all the betting round decisions on the Flop

Sometimes the decision point for the whole hand comes on the Flop. The decision on whether to call or fold on the Turn and River is made along with the decision to call or fold on the Flop. This can occur if your opponent is steaming and you think there is a high probability that he is bluffing.

Since he is on tilt, he is going to keep betting hoping that you will fold. This will happen more often in shorthanded games because players generally think they can bully their way through because there are fewer players that need to fold for them to win the pot. When the card that comes next is a scare card, such as an A, it usually only increases the chances that he will keep betting, since he wants to use it as a scare card against you. This means that against steamers, you should not let a scare card frighten you into folding as often.

Normally on the Flop, you would make your decision as to whether or not to call one bet into a pot of six bets without thinking too much about the Turn or River yet. However, if you have decided he is steaming and he is going to bet through the River no matter what comes, then your effective odds are much lower. In this case, the effective odds would be 9.5 to 5 or 1.9 to 1. If you win the hand, then you win 4.5 small bets pre-Flop (assuming you were in the big blind and the small blind had folded), 1 small bet on the Flop, 2 small bets on the Turn and 2 small bets on the River, for a total of 9.5 small bets. If you lose the hand, then you lose 1 small bet on the Flop, 2 small bets on the Turn and 2 small bets on the River.

You do not want to raise because you want him to keep bluffing. A raise may scare him off and force him to fold instead of bluffing. Meanwhile if he actually has a strong hand, a raise will cost you more money. Of course, the tradeoff of not raising is the risk of giving away a free card and having him actually catch a pair to beat you.